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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAHRAN 000275

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS AND JEREMY BERNDT

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SUBJECT: WOMEN CANDIDATES TRY AGAIN IN EASTERN PROVINCE CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE ELECTIONS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Joseph Kenny, Dhahran Consul General, Department
of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) For the second time in the history of the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry (EPCCI), the Government (SAG) will allow women to run for membership on the board of the EPCCI. Their previous attempt to obtain a seat on the board in 2005 was unsuccessful. This time around, women are better organized and strategizing for victory. The ballot will include three female candidates (a fourth candidate recently withdrew), who are optimistic they will be able to provide a strong showing. More doubtful, even among women, are their prospects for victory. END SUMMARY.

Elections

¶2. (U) On November 8, PolOff met with Abdul Rahman F. al-Homiyn, Assistant Secretary General for Committees Affairs at the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry (EPCCI) and Saeed al-Abdullah, Public Relations Department Manager. The discussion focused on EPCCI structure and organization, as well as the upcoming elections of the new EPCCI Board. Figuring prominently in the discussion of the upcoming elections was the role of women candidates. This is only the second election in which the SAG will allow women to place their name on the ballot. Their last attempt to obtain a seat, in 2005, was unsuccessful.

¶3. (U) Candidate submissions for the upcoming EPCCI elections closed in early November. Thirty-eight candidates are in the running, 10 so-called "industrialists" and 28 "merchants." The women participating in the election fall under the "merchants" category, said al-Homiyn. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) oversees the process, without interference, according to al-Homiyn. There are approximately 40,000 registered, paying members of the EPCCI, which accepts members on five different tiers, ranging from 400SR (approximately \$100/yr) to 10,000SR (\$2600/yr) for an annual membership. There are an estimated 1,200 female members. The EPCCI holds elections for 12 of its

18 board members every four years; the remaining six members are selected and appointed by the MOCI during the same period. There were six polling stations available for voting during the previous election. At that time, there were only an estimated 22,000 members in the EPCCI, said al-Homiyn. (Comment: The near doubling in EPCCI membership is evidence of the economic boom and the growth of business the EP has experienced over the past several years. End Comment.) Al-Homiyn was unaware of how many polling stations will be available this year. PolOff will visit election sites, to the extent possible, once their locations are available.

Strategizing

14. (C) On November 8, PolOff met with Samia al-Edrisi (protect), a prominent businesswoman and CEO of an Eastern Province company (Eastern Forum Co. Ltd. for Advancement and Development, currently investing in real estate), in her home. She was a candidate during the 2005 EPCCI elections and said that the 2005 elections included women on the ballot very late in the game. As such, she emphasized, there was insufficient time to prepare and develop an election strategy. Al-Edrisi said she will not run for a seat on the EPCCI Board this year. However, she and her associates are in the process of determining which of the current female candidates to endorse. Once this is decided, her company will put its full weight and resources behind the female candidate, to include financial backing, a call center, and media exposure. Al-Edrisi, despite her commitment, is not confident that voters will elect a female candidate. Her strategy, however, is to generate enough votes for a single female candidate, thereby demonstrating the popular desire to

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have a female representative on the board. In addition, she hopes that a strong showing will pressure the appointment of a woman to one of the board's six appointed seats.

15. (C) Al-Edrisi is expecting that a strong showing in the election will force the hand of the Minister of Commerce and Industry to appoint a female to the board. Al-Edrisi's motives go beyond the current election however. She is calculating that a strong showing of female candidates, including a possible victory with the appointment of a female to the board, could yield political dividends further down the road. If and when Municipal Council elections allow women to participate, al-Edrisi expects to use the political capital from her EPCCI experience to run as a Municipal Council candidate.

16. (C) Also, on November 8, PDOff attended an event hosted by Haifa Ahmed al-Romaih, EPCCI Business Women Committee Vice Chairman, for the women running in the EPCCI elections. A member of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dr. Lama Suleiman, was scheduled to deliver remarks. However, she was unable to attend. Many of the women present at the event recognized the importance of public support. They are strategizing how best to secure endorsements from companies. They said that they are not concerned that the "women's vote" is split by four women and they will support all of the women contestants. The mantra repeated among them was "We want change." (Comment: The women are campaign savvy, and they are trying to use technology and the media to show that they have the confidence that they can win. Additionally, it was evident that most of them view their running for the elections as a women's rights issue, as well as a way to confront the old boy's

network. End Comment.) PDOff also met with Hana al-Zuheir (protect), former head of the Women's Chamber of Commerce and current head of the Prince Sultan Fund, on November 9 to discuss the upcoming elections.

And The Candidates Are . . .

17. (C) The women candidates are:

- o Souad al-Zaidi: grew up in Aramco. Not viewed as strong in business, but very savvy.
- o Fawzia al-Kari: began her career in the field of education, now works in the construction business, which is very rare for a Saudi woman. Viewed as strong in business, but not as savvy as Suad al-Zaydi. Fawzia entered the race, she said, because she saw that no other women were running and thus was shocked.
- o Dina al-Faris: regarded as young and ambitious. At age 29, she holds a B.A. in International Business Management and an LL.M. She now works as Assistant to the President for Al-Faris Group.
- o Aqila Madkhali: relative unknown, comes from the education field. On November 16, Samia al-Edrisi reported that Aqila withdrew her candidacy. Samia commented that Aqila, a conservative Muslim with little business experience, withdrew as a result of feeling overwhelmed by the process of elections.

These women are working closely with the women who ran in the 2005 EPCCI elections, as well as with female members of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, hoping to learn from their experience. The prevailing view is that in 2005, there was a lot of talk about supporting the women running, but when the rubber hit the road, they received absolutely no support. According to Hana al-Zuheir, who was an election observer in 2005, the vast majority of women cast their ballots for men.

Composition of the EPCCI Board and Candidates

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18. (U) Changes to the regulations for this year's elections, which women view as working in their favor, include:

- o The Minister of Commerce and Industry will appoint the Secretary General for the Kingdom-wide Chamber of Commerce (rather than elect).
- o There will be no caucuses/parties/blocs allowed.
- o Each voter will vote for one person only, instead of a set of candidates.

Comment

19. (C) The inclusion of women in the 2009 EPCCI elections is significant because it may eventually pave the way for women to run for other offices. These women believe that it is unlikely they could win in the EPCCI elections, but it is not about winning for them. They view their participation in the elections, no matter the outcome, as progress. It was only in 2005 that the EPCCI elections were opened to women candidates. It is believed that some sectors of government, anticipating the strong opposition to women's political participation from religious conservatives, want to introduce the notion of elections, as well as women's participation in them, gradually. It is anticipated that municipal elections will be next, though the date remains unclear. Municipal elections were scheduled for November 2009 but are now postponed for two years. The status quo may not be disturbed by women's participation in the EPCCI elections. However, their participation in the EPCCI elections could open the door ever so slightly to greater female participation in business and government organizations. End Comment.

CG: JKENNY